

THE UPSIDE-DOWN JOY OF PAUL:  
A THEMATIC COMMENTARY ON PAUL'S LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

by

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## Introduction

It is sometimes easy to disconnect scripture from the real people, places, and time of its writing. However, the epistles can quickly lose their personal nature when we read them as nothing more than a theological text and forget that they were intimate letters of correspondence between close friends, separated by distance and circumstance. These critical details help us understand the letter's original purpose and influence how readers today can apply its message to their lives.

Paul's letter to the Philippian church is filled with joy and happiness, but how is this possible when Paul writes the letter from a Roman prison? In this short letter, he writes the words *joy* and *rejoice* sixteen times!<sup>1</sup> Is he simply "putting on a brave face" for those who looked to him for guidance, or is there something deeper behind his words? When we take the time to understand the circumstances surrounding Paul and the lives of those in the Philippian church, Paul's inspirational message becomes clear. He finds joy in living fully and completely for Christ, his Savior, regardless of his circumstances. As Paul is unsure of his fate, he uses this letter to remind the church in Philippi of the importance of living in the same way.

This essay will explore the unique and challenging circumstances surrounding the Philippian church and Paul's mission. It will explore how, through this letter, Paul's seemingly upside-down joy inspired and uplifted those in the first century and continues to do so today.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul's letter to the Philippians contains only 1,600 words and includes the words *joy* and *rejoice* sixteen times. Comparatively, Paul's letter to the Romans contains 7,000 words and includes the words *joy* and *rejoice* seven times.

## Paul's Second Mission and the Origin of the Philippian Church

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony in Macedonia, founded in 368 BCE by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. At the time of Paul, it is estimated that the population of Philippi sat between 10,000 and 15,000 people.<sup>2</sup> As a Roman Colony, they worshipped many gods and goddesses and also honoured the emperor as a god.

Paul came to Philippi with Silas between 49—50 CE on his second missionary journey,<sup>3</sup> believing that God had given him a vision, calling him to bring the Good News to Philippi (Acts 16:9 NLT<sup>4</sup>). Because unknown religions were not permitted to be practiced within the city walls,<sup>5</sup> Paul heads to the river on the Sabbath and finds women praying outside the city gates. Here, he meets the first convert of the Philippian church, Lydia—a wealthy merchant of purple fabric, who offers her home as a place for them to stay (Acts 16:15). This early member of the Philippian church has a giving heart, and longs to do what she can to help other Christians and to help forward the mission of the church. As we read Paul's letter to the Philippians, it is evident that she is not the only one who lives generously.

Paul commends the Philippian church, calling them his “partners in spreading the Good News about Christ” (Phil 1:5). He says they always followed his instructions (2:12) and were unique in their financial support of his missions (4:15). Although we do not know the precise financial situation of these church members, it is highly probable that, although Lydia was a well-paid merchant, many of the Christians in Philippi would have experienced financial

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<sup>2</sup> Oakes, *Philippians*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Verhoef, *Philippi*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical text comes from the NLT Bible.

<sup>5</sup> *Life Application*, 2014.

struggles. As a small group of Christian Gentiles in a Roman colony, they probably experienced persecution, and their minority status would have made finding work difficult, leading to poverty.<sup>6</sup>

After some time in Philippi, Paul and Silas are wrongfully imprisoned for casting out a demon (Acts 16:16—40). Their rights as Roman citizens had been ignored because of the selfishness of one man, and a mob quickly turned against them. But even in their imprisonment, Paul and Silas show their honour. Once they are released, they immediately visit Lydia and other believers to encourage them once more before they leave for Thessalonica (Acts 16:40). However, Paul does visit the Philippian church several times again before his Roman imprisonment, where he writes the epistle of Philippians.<sup>7</sup>

The church in Philippi had every right to see their position and experience as difficult, and their hearts could have become hard because of that. However, as we will find in the Philippian letter, Paul taught them to be joy-filled in any circumstance and to find their joy in Jesus Christ alone. Because of this perspective, in their circumstances, they chose to help fund Paul's mission with what little they had and became a source of financial and spiritual support for Paul and his helpers.

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<sup>6</sup> Verhoef, *Philippi*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Verhoef, *Philippi*, 21.

### Philippians 1: Joy in Suffering

Paul begins his letter with greetings, labelling himself as a *slave* [δοῦλοι] of Christ Jesus (Phil 1:1). For Paul to mark himself as a *slave* for Christ meant that he could not do as he pleased, would never be released and was Christ's possession with no will of his own.<sup>8</sup> To say then in 1:2 that the Philippians also *belong* to Christ Jesus suggests that they too should understand themselves as slaves, and should align their behaviour with Paul, in obedience to Christ their master.

As slaves of Jesus, they are all called to spread the Gospel, and Paul says that he regularly prays for the Philippians *with joy* (1:4). He prays that they will love and grow in their understanding of “what really matters” (1:10) as this brings glory to God (1:11). But Paul is a prisoner in Rome, and the Philippian church is struggling with disunity and preachers who are working out of selfish ambition, and a desire to somehow further distress Paul (1:17). Despite these difficulties, Paul says that he rejoices because Jesus' message is being preached (1:18–19).

Because of Paul's enslavement to Christ, the only thing that matters—the only thing that brings him joy—is doing his master's will. Since he can do that from his prison cell, his life continues to overflow with joy. Paul is unsure of his fate—whether he will live or die—but he finds joy in either circumstance (1:20–24). As long as he lives, his joy will come from helping the Philippian church grow in its faith (1:25), and he encourages them to remember that they are to be united as citizens of heaven (1:27). Their suffering is to be considered a privilege (1:29), and through his letter, Paul teaches them how to do this, leading by example.

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<sup>8</sup> Barclay, *Letters to the Philippians*, 9.

## **Philippians 2: Joy in Serving**

In the second section of the Philippian letter, Paul begins by asking those in the church to be united in their love, work, and purpose (2:2). In verses 3 and 4, Paul gives three reasons for disunity, all of which can still be recognized as troublesome in the church today—selfishness, arrogance, and greed.

In selfishness, it is possible to be more concerned with forwarding your own wealth or position instead of working to advance the work of the Gospel. Instead of being selfish, Paul says not to concern yourself with what others think of you. In arrogance, we look down on others, believing they have nothing positive to add. Instead of being arrogant, in humility, we should believe others are better than we are. Finally, when we greedily concentrate on ourselves and our own interests, we become blind to the needs and importance of others. Instead of focusing on ourselves, we should take an interest in the lives of others (2:3-4). This kind of love, radiating outward from self to others, is how Jesus modelled his life for us. Paul's hymn (2:6-11) celebrates how Jesus lived—although he was fully God, he willingly gave up all privilege and authority of divinity and lived a human life in service to others.

God is a good master, working in us and through us to do what pleases him (2:13). We are his servants, and so Paul reminds the church to do God's work without complaint or argument (2:14) as Timothy and Epaphroditus have done (2:19–30). Paul rejoices in this kind of service, even with the possibility of losing one's life, as he believes that our life and service are offerings for God. He then invites the Philippians to also rejoice in their service—and as they do, they will share in each other's joy (2:17–18).

### **Philippians 3: Joy in Surrendering**

After discussing the real possibility of death for a life dedicated to spreading the Gospel, Paul's following words are, "Whatever happens . . . rejoice in the Lord" (3:1). Paul has told them this before but knows that it will safeguard their faith (3:1). The faith of the Philippian Christians was being challenged, not only by the Romans, but also by Jewish teachers and preachers who were trying to undo the work Paul and the church were doing.<sup>9</sup> Where the Christians were teaching that we were saved by the actions of Jesus, the Jews were teaching inclusion through circumcision, heritage, and strict adherence to the law (3:2, 5, 9). Paul reminds the Philippians that he has first-hand experience in this Jewish faith practice and that in the light of what Jesus has done, he now counts it all as worthless (3:8).

One of the main differences between the Jews and the Christians is the Christian's belief that they are unable, in any way, to do anything that would make them more worthy of salvation and God's love. Each Christian needs to surrender their ability, power, and impact, trusting that Jesus Christ has done everything that can be done to save us. Our surrender is of our own glory and power. This upholds, what William Barclay calls, the "indestructibility of Christian joy." The idea is that everything in our lives can be lost except Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Even in pain and death, Christians have joy because nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom 8:38–39). Paul petitions the Philippians to follow his words and actions (Phil 3:17) and repeats that we are citizens of heaven, so we must live as such.

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<sup>9</sup> Barclay, *Letters to the Philippians*, 67.

<sup>10</sup> Barclay, *Letters to the Philippians*, 65.

### **Philippians 4: Joy in Supporting**

This final section of Paul's letter to the Philippians is steeped in love and affection. He longs to see his friends again and calls them his joy and crown (4:1). He addresses a disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche but does not speak ill of them (4:2–3). Instead, he affirms their hard work and asks others in the church to help them settle their issues.

Paul overflows with joy and encourages his readers to always rejoice in the Lord (4:4). He tells the Philippians not to worry about anything but to pray to God for their needs (4:6). Knowing the difficulty both he and the church are experiencing, he then tells them that through prayer, they will experience God's peace that passes all understanding (4:7). This is the key to their joy. He does not tell them they will not experience suffering but that God will give them peace *in* their suffering, so much so that it won't make sense to those outside the faith. This is the upside-down joy Paul has found and now preaches to others.

Over many years, Paul has supported the Philippian church with teaching and loyalty, and in response to this love and faithfulness, they have supported Paul in his missions and while in prison. Paul praises God for their concern and acknowledges that even though he has learned to be content with very little, he is grateful to have received their gifts (4:11). Paul tells the Philippians that God is pleased with what they have given to him, and as God has taken care of him through their generosity, so too will God supply the Philippians with their needs (4:19).

Nowhere are Christians assured of a life free of suffering. Although we may *want* lives like this, God promises to supply our *needs*. God used the church in Philippi to support Paul in his need, and they can be assured of receiving all they need as they continue to live in Christ.



## Conclusion

Although Paul wrote this letter to the Philippian church in the first century, his letters have continued to challenge and teach our churches ever since. As we read, it becomes clear why Philippians is widely known as “The Letter of Joy.” Paul speaks about joy in suffering, serving, surrendering, and supporting, but the single source of all this joy is his Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Paul was a prisoner in a Roman jail. He was prohibited from travelling for his missions and faced the possibility of death. Still, he found joy in his Saviour. The Philippian church was a minority people group in a culture that did not accept them. They struggled with poverty and marginalization. The individuals who received this letter from Paul could not have possibly known that in a few short years, Nero would begin persecuting Christians en masse and would even be responsible for the martyrdom of both Paul and Peter.<sup>11</sup> Although Paul would not have known what lay before himself and the Philippian church, God led him to write this letter of encouragement, giving them a way to live joyfully, in even the most difficult of circumstances.

No matter what is taken from us—our freedom, comfort or even our lives—we are assured that nothing can separate us from our loving God, our sole source of joy. We can rest assured that, as slaves of God, we will find joy in obeying the will of our master. We can find joy in surrendering our power and acknowledging that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient for our salvation. Finally, through selfless giving, we can be the hands and feet of Jesus in this world, supplying for the needs of others in the knowledge that our God will also meet our needs.

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<sup>11</sup> Kerrigan, *Dark History*, 109.

To those outside the church, Paul probably appeared crazy. The world wants us to believe that *we* need to be in control, supply all our own needs, hoard our wealth, and always be on the lookout for bigger and better. However, Paul teaches by example how to be content in our lives, whether we have much or nothing (4:12). We need to pray and trust that God will provide all we need to accomplish God's good plan.

Though Paul experienced much suffering, his joy in the Lord overcame all. By reading the letter to the Philippians, we can understand the source of Paul's upside-down joy and the peace that passes all understanding. As he was for the Christians in Philippi, Paul can be our guide and model for living a life steeped in the joy of Jesus Christ.

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## **5 Week Sermon Series on Paul's Letter to the Philippians**

### **Week 1: Suffering is a Platform, Not an Excuse**

**Scripture:** Philippians 1:1-11

**Summary:** Paul highly honoured the relationships he held with each of his church communities.

Although he spent a lot of time travelling or in prison, he continued to connect with these faith communities through his letters.

Paul's ability to be honest and real about his pain and suffering was an important part of his communication, but he never let his suffering impede his efforts to help and grow others' faith.

Today, we often feel that suffering is a valid excuse for shrinking away from the world. We don't share what is going on, and we don't ask for help. We "put on a happy face" and struggle alone until we figure things out for ourselves. We also find it challenging to help others when we are struggling. After all, "my life is so hard, I can't possibly take on someone else's pain too."

When we look at Paul's life (through his letters) as an example, we see that he found much joy in his connection to others and helping others during his suffering. Was Paul on to something? How can we study Paul's example and learn how to use our suffering as a platform instead of an excuse?

### **Week 2: Joy in Suffering**

**Scripture:** Philippians 1:12-30

**Summary:** The only thing that matters to Paul is sharing the Gospel with anyone and everyone he meets. Because of this, he sees opportunity in every situation he finds himself in, good or bad. Paul's imprisonment has taken away many opportunities; others are acting against him out of jealousy and selfishness, and he even faces the possibility of death. But through it all, his only concern is that the Good News of Jesus Christ spreads as far as it can go.

Everyone struggles. As Christians, we are not promised a pain-free life. However, it is the way you view your struggles that will help get you through them. How can Paul's

perspective on finding joy in suffering help reorient us in dealing with the difficult situations we find ourselves in today?

### **Week 3: Joy in Serving**

**Scripture:** Philippians 2

**Summary:** Disunity in the Christian church is all too common today. However, this is not unique to our time. Paul's letter to the Philippian church addresses issues like selfishness, arrogance, and greed. Unfortunately, our human natures drive us to desire control, power, and respect, and church members are not immune to these desires. However, Paul implores the church to learn from how Jesus lived. He laid down his authority and power and humbled himself to serve those around him. How would our lives, churches, communities, and world change if we not only lived to serve each other but found joy in that service?

### **Week 4: Joy in Surrendering**

**Scripture:** Philippians 3

**Summary:** The Jewish religious leaders were the main opposition to Jesus' ministry. After Jesus' death and resurrection, the Jewish leaders continued to protest the spreading and teachings of the young Christian church. Christianity believes we can only access eternal life through the grace and mercy of Jesus' death and resurrection. We have no power, ability, or way of adding anything to our salvation—Jesus has done it all. The Jews, however, believed they needed to do many things to receive eternal life. As a devout Jew throughout his life, Paul now recognized that the Jewish practices of circumcision and law-keeping were worthless, but the Jews held on to these responsibilities firmly. What are we holding on to? Do we think we can act or speak a certain way to add to our deservedness, or can we surrender control of our lives to the sacrifice and will of Jesus Christ?

**Week 5: Joy in Supporting****Scripture:** Philippians 4**Title:** Joy in Supporting

**Summary:** From Paul's own admission, churches were not known for financially supporting apostles or missionaries, but the church in Philippi had done so faithfully over the years. Even when they were more than likely struggling financially, there was always a way to send support to their friend and preacher, Paul.

The Philippians joyfully supported Paul because they believed in his mission, saw value in his work for Christ, and loved him dearly. Giving money to something that brings you joy doesn't feel like a sacrifice—it feels like an honour.

Our first-world lives are costly. Even the essentials like housing and food take nearly our entire monthly paycheck. Because of this, giving to the church might feel like a luxury we simply can't afford, but Paul teaches us not to worry because God will supply all our needs. How can we view financial support for those in need as something that brings us joy?